

THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF ALBANIA:

PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES 2012

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The opinions and results presented in this study do not represent those held by the donors, the Eu Delegation in Albania.



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This project is funded by the European Union

Acknowledgements:

The Albanian Institute for International Studies would like to express its gratitude to the following institutions that supported the project 'The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2012':

-Austrian Development Agency (ADA), Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) Albania and Open Society Foundation in Albania (OSFA), the European Union Information Centers in Shkodra and Vlora.

 Austrian
Development Cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

The Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) brings to the reader the 2012 edition of the yearly survey study 'The European Perspective of Albania', an authoritative and established publication, part of the European program which is one of the key programs of the AIIS regular activity. After nine years of carefully collecting, reporting, analyzing and interpreting the perceptions and expectations of the Albanian public related to EU and integration, AIIS has now a valuable experience and has built a solid reputation both with domestic as well as with international institutions referring valuable data and providing practical recommendations in relation to furthering the citizens involvement in the integration process.

The main objective of this study continues to be: raising and consolidating local ownership of the process of integration, giving a voice to citizen concerns and adjusting local and European policies in order for them to be more effective in the context of integration. AIIS has always respected a strong transparency policy and has used all efforts to secure a proper dissemination of the survey results and recommendations, going beyond traditional diffusion mechanisms focused in the capital. This year, AIIS adopted a different strategy for disseminating the results of the survey, releasing some key findings in a press conference one day prior to the issue of the Progress Report, hence using the elevated media sensitivity in order to have a more enhanced public impact. Indeed this year marks a very beneficial

collaboration between AIIS and Albanian media in relation to making the survey accessible to wider audiences in Albania.

Media has evaluated the usefulness of this report and has expressed its desire to join hands in providing more qualitative information to the public for integration.

As for the general context in which this year's survey took place, it was shaped by the status debate: all political events and decisions of political actors and forces were analyzed through the lenses of the October evaluation of whether to grant Albania the candidate status or not. This factor colored most of the media coverage of Albanian politics and entered into the popular jargon with strength as the status decision this year coincides with the historical marking of Albania's 100th anniversary of its declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire and consequently the 100th birthday for the Albanian state.

Elevated media attention and coverage of the integration process dynamics as well as the contextualization of many developments in within the integration debate has been reflected in more awareness of the Albanian public about the EU integration process and current status. Such media intensity coupled with a dry conditionality anchoring has however in some cases produced controversial climate such as in the discussion of 'immunities', hampering the anchoring of this development in the context of necessary reforms and presenting it more as *'something that is required from Brussels.'*

Since November of last year, the political agreement between the major political forces has thawed the integration process from its

1. AIIS press conference was attended by major television channels in Albania as well as from the European Chanel France 24. For some examples of domestic media coverage please see: Ora News <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-SZ0CqNrG4&feature=youtu.be>; and Vizion Plus <http://www.youtube.com/embed/5ePBB0aTRP0>

dangerously frozen impasse and has achieved significant progress in adopting necessary legislation and appointing officials in vacant places. Developments such as the passing of the Electoral Reform in the parliament, the lifting of immunities as one of the major obstacles to investigations of high level officials as well as a series of laws adopted with 3/5 majority have been some of the key outcomes of the resumed dialogue between majority and opposition. However this dialogue had its abrupt stops with the election by a simple majority of a nonconsensual President in the summer.²⁾

In the economic realm, expectations about macroeconomic growth have been adjusted downwards and the problems associated with low consumption continue. The debate between government and opposition on the two alternative methods of taxation: flat and progressive has intensified over the year. Economic issues have been at the forefront of people's sensitivity, given the fact that this year precedes an electoral year.³⁾ From the past experience of AIIS, while approaching the round of elections people sensitivity and attention shifts towards preoccupations about the elections once the campaign draws closer.

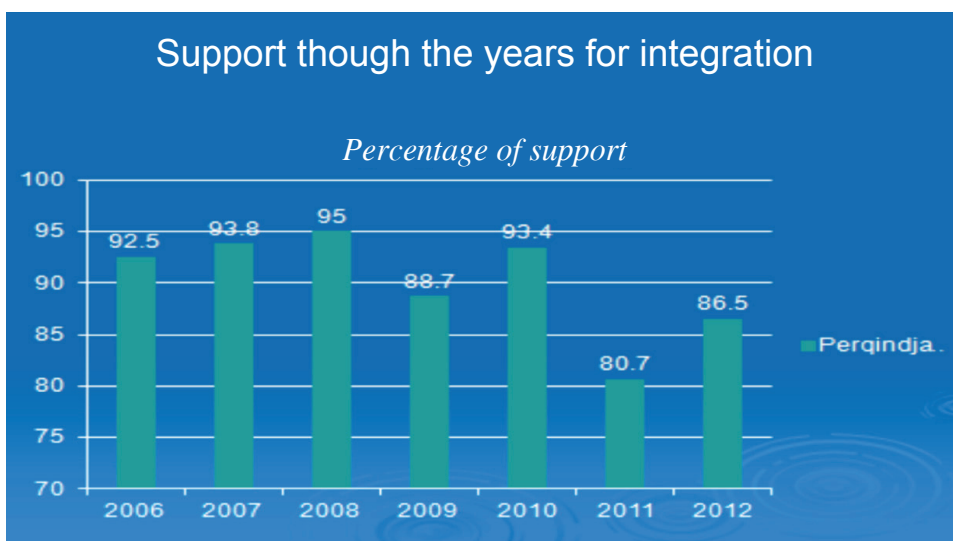
Overall the context has been remarkably more positive than last year when the political impasse aggravated by events such as those of the 21st of January and local election problems in May took a heavy toll on the integration process. This year the achieved progress built up the suspense on citizens that good news would come from Brussels.

2. Bujar Nishani was elected President in the fourth round with 73 votes of the majority MPs. The Progress Report presented this development as not building on the political dialogue achieved. European Commission: Albania Progress Report 2012, pg.6 http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/al_rapport_2012_en.pdf

3. The polling took place on April, in the moment of the writing of this report the focus on elections is rising since the next round of general elections is expected in the first half of the next year.

It is interesting to note that despite the highly visible central theme of celebrating the 100th anniversary of the independence of Albania, as well as recurrent nationalistic rhetoric from new political groups⁴⁾, there has been no negative influence on the support for European integration, on the contrary even the status decision has been often framed as a symbolic motivation for Albania given on this important year.

Comparative notes



The Albanian Institute has been measuring support for the EU and the integration process since 2003, hence some lines of comparisons through the years are in order to complete a panorama of developments in the field of perceptions.

Support for Albania's membership to the EU remains high, even too high compared not only to new members, but even to the ones who

3. Example: Red and Black Alliance, a party established last year, has used strong rhetoric especially in relation to Greece.

aspire to be part of the union in the future. It is very interesting to note that even amidst a growing Euro skepticism over Europe, as a result of the economic crisis, particularly the Eurozone crisis which has shaken the trust in the future of the European project, Albanian citizens are enthusiastic and ardent supporters of membership of their country to the EU.

Throughout a decade, during which Albania was able to build stability while leaving behind a cycle of reoccurring crisis, support of its citizens for the European project has been spectacularly popular, and, as mentioned above, incomparable to that in other countries.

As such, since the first measuring of perceptions and thinking on EU integration in 2003, Albanians support for the EU has never reached below 80% levels, a level of support which has never been achieved in any of the member states or non, of the EU.

In 2009, a relative decrease in support was observed (From 95% in 2008, to 88,7% in 2009) which was thought to signify the start of some sort of skepticism in the Albanian society regarding the European integration process, an accompanying trend throughout the whole history of the EU. Furthermore, it was hoped that this decrease would be a warning for a clear understanding of the process and the reforms, changes and factors which prepare a country for membership in the European Union.

From the perspective of necessity of the modernization of society, or rather, the emancipation of Albanian society “ *voting against membership*” could be useful and necessary in mainly two aspects: Firstly, because it could encourage a debate related to European Integration, and secondly, on the more broader perspective of society, it could represent the beginnings for the nurturing of a sense of critical thinking in the Albanian society.

However, the above mentioned assumptions, were proved wrong after only one year. Survey result in 2010 showed more or less the same support, 93.4%, as in previous years of high support (2006, 2007, 2008).

In 2011, votes for the membership of Albania in the EU seemed to reach the lowest point in the last 10 years, but it is still a popular vote, 80.7% and as we have said before, unmatched by any member state (or non) of the EU.

This “low point” of support for Albanian’s membership could not, under any circumstances, be explained by any kind of skepticism for the usefulness and possibility of Albania’s membership to the EU, and even less so, represent the beginning of an ideological opposition to the EU and integration process. The reason behind the fall of support to 80.7 % was then argued, and rightfully so, to be related to the removal of the visa regime with EU countries.

It was hoped , that with the removal of the visa regime, support for the membership to the EU would be more “normal”, meaning lower, and the fundamental argument, undisputable at the time, was that Albanians identified membership to the EU and the whole process of integration with the free movement opportunity and therefore support was popular.

It was hoped that a “normal” support, similar to that of other countries, could warn of a sense of critical thinking in the Albanian society, away from so high results of more than 90% which bring back memories of election results during the communist regime. Such a trend, would also suggest a clear and proper understanding of the process of Albania’s preparation for integration to the EU. However, the fall of support (2011) amidst the opportunity of Albanian citizens to move freely in Europe, was almost insignificant, or at least insufficient grounds upon which the above mentioned hypothesis of

critical thinking and understanding of the process as a set of internal reforms which would transform society, politics, economy and the functioning of state and democracy could be built.

With this years survey (2012) we have the confirmation that support for EU membership in the EU is popular, unique, almost “*totalitarian*”. In a hypothetical referendum, 86.7% of Albanians would vote for Albania’s membership in the EU.

The explanation and interpretation of this kind of support, almost impossible to compare to any other country is necessary, beyond academic/scientific curiosity. The following are a few arguments which could explain and interpret this consistent support in Albania.

First and foremost, the political spectrum in Albania does not include any party, organization, influential individual that has been against the membership project even as critical voices have risen in the last few years. Criticism has been mostly related to the process of integration rather than directed at EU or the perspective of being in the EU itself.

Second, the expectations about the benefits that Albanians link to EU membership are quite high and often unrealistic. Yet they provide powerful incentives for support. Moreover, the membership itself in the EU could signify the end of the post communist transition from a social perspective

The almost unanimous vote of Albanians for membership in the EU could also be related to the political culture of a society, which is used to be afraid to openly declare what it thinks, and especially, could be afraid to speak against what both the government and opposition says, along with the media, NGO’s, research institutes, religious institutions, including the “ambassadors” who from many

Albanians are considered as the saviors as well as the guiding figures. The Albanian society surprisingly reflects a post colonialist culture, despite the fact that Albania was never a colony.⁴⁾

Finally, support at such a large scale, is also related to the glorification of the west, mystification of the west in general and Europe in particular. It could be summarized in the rhetorical question: *Why should we oppose membership to the west and in the developed Europe?*

This list of arguments and assumptions for the “almost totalitarian” support for Albanian membership to the EU is debatable, and could be certainly expanded.

4. Albert Rakipi, Executive Director AIIS, Interview ORA News RTV

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

-Support and Importance: the double edged sword

86.5 percent of Albanians would definitely vote in favor of the accession of Albania in the European Union, while only 7 percent would cast their vote against it. The level of support has increased by 6 percentage points compared to last year and continues to be testimony to the fact that Albania has the largest support factor among perception of population in the region. Moreover, for 57.5 percent of the respondents European integration is very important in their personal realm while for a third of the sample it is quite important but not a priority. Only 6 percent attach no importance to the process, representing a very minor category.

There is no dilemma over the fact that the high support for EU accession is first and foremost positive and should really encourage local politicians and political parties to make use of this support. A number of reforms, particularly economic ones might be very painful from the social side and yet the political elite in Albania have an almost unique chance to implement them while arguing that they are related to EU accession preparations. Similarly the support for EU project can be useful to many initiatives and projects of the other actors in Albanian society including civil society think tanks, media and even religious communities.

This support should also be used properly by the European Union and its institutions as long as the EU is still committed to the enlargement process. EU membership has been the main driving force for Albanian

state reconstruction very similar to other countries in the region of Southeastern Europe which have been inspired by the same incentive. It is important to mention the fact that it has also served as a platform for constructing peace, fostering reconciliation and building trust among states in the Balkans, inclusive of Albania.

This peace and reconciliation project is still incomplete and finished in the Balkans and Albania, despite not having the negative experience of ethnic conflict which scarred ex- Yugoslav countries, still needs to come to terms with the past and make a clear break with those past features that do not belong to the foundations of European culture.

The EU can use this major support for integration in Albania, and in some other countries of the region equally interested to progress in their integration path, especially in the context of enlarging the European markets, in a backdrop of the severe economic and Euro zone crisis which seems that will take a considerable time before subsiding.

The reason why this major support for European integration might be 'bad for the process' relate mostly to a big misunderstanding related to the process of European integration.

This process continues to be perceived mostly as an external, foreign policy related one, as a relation with an outside actor rather than a transformative process for Albania itself. To illustrate this one can look at Albanian citizens' expectations regarding what they believe will follow (rather than precede) accession: free and fair elections, functioning justice system, less corruption, more rule of law, etc) All these issues are in fact preconditions and major structural problems which Albania needs to deal with well before accession can be made possible.

Hence, when reasons of support are considered the majority, 38 percent say that they expect the standards of living to rise while

another 18 percent expects new job places. Around 13 percent expect either less corruption or more justice. The combination of the slowdown of economic growth at home with considerations of the crisis at large in Europe has influenced perception by putting economic concern and expectations at the forefront.

For 40 percent of the skeptics (those who would vote against) the primary reason is expected inflation while for slightly more than a quarter of them, risks to the Albanian identity are the reason for being against.

-Progress: fluctuating evaluations

Half the sample asked (49.1 percent) believes that Albania is not yet ready to join the EU while less than a third (30.1 percent) believe that indeed it is. One fifth of the respondents cannot give an answer to this question signaling confusion.

Albanians appear less strict when it comes to whether EU should grant Albanian membership despite its readiness. Hence 38 percent say it should not do so before Albania is ready but a very similar 37.3 percent think that EU should accept Albania even before the latter is fully ready to join. Yet again a quarter of the sample does not answer this question.

When asked to assess the progress that Albania has achieved in its integration path compared to one year ago, the majority of the sample seems to believe that the progress have been either average or little.

While 13.4 percent believe the progress has been quite substantial and another 14.4 percent does not acknowledge any kind of progress, a combined 68 percent assesses the progress as somewhat or little.

Asked about their expectations for this particular year and the candidate status, Albanians were only very slightly on the optimistic side, 39.2 percent of them said that the answer on the candidate status was going to be positive (The questionnaire did not make any specifications about conditional status). A full third of the sample (33.5 percent) did not believe that Albania was going to be granted the candidate status. The full correct answer of this question is going to be revealed in December since the EC recommendations have been positive yet conditional. 27.2 could not answer this question, or said that they didn't know.

40 percent of Albanians expect their accession year to the EU to be 2020, a date given quite frequently even in past surveys. A very optimistic third of the sample expect unrealistically though the accession to happen in the following two years. 12 percent believe accession is going to happen after 2020 and 18 percent don't know. The number of people who believe Albania is never going to become an EU member state has decreased significantly from last year to an insignificant minor group (3 percent).

-Factors and institutions: from parties to the executive, the trip back to normalcy

Three main factors are singled out by around 40 percent of respondents attaching to each of them utmost importance when assessing their influence on the integration process itself and on its pace. Albanian politics (44 percent), Albanian Economy (40 percent) and Free and Fair Elections (41 percent) are on the top of the list in citizens' perceptions when asked about factors shaping European integration.

'Free and Fair elections' return to the agenda after last year being not mentioned so frequently. The approach of the electoral year has increased the sensitivity of the citizens towards the elections even before the EC set them up as a precondition for the opening of the accession negotiations.

The factors that are considered as less important to this process continue to be as in the previous years: the religious composition of the Albanian and the regional context, chosen by 14 and 13 percent each as very important factors.

When institutions are considered citizens seem to acknowledge the consensus reached between the main two political camps, stepping aside from the political crisis mode. Hence while last year citizens attached major importance to political parties as institutions for the European integration, this year 42.3 percent of them associate responsibility and importance where it belongs, to the executive hence the government. 21 percent pick the Parliament as the most important institution while only 18 percent continue to hold the opinion that political parties are those that matter for the integration process of Albania.

-International Partners: ‘no news is good news’

Not much has changed in the level of esteem that Albanians have for the relation with the EU, the US and important major international organizations such as NATO and UN. Year after year the European Union is reconfirmed as the chosen main strategic partner, specifically this year by 79.8 percent. It is followed closely by the United States with 78.8 percent that believe relations with US are of outmost importance.

Albanians retain the same high level of support for NATO and the UN with 61 percent attaching strategic importance to relations with both.

Except for major international organizations and alliances as well as the USA, the questionnaire aims to measure perceptions about EU neighbors, countries from the Western Balkans and other countries which in a way represent different geopolitical anchors (Turkey, Arab countries, Russia).

When neighbors are considered, Italy leads with 52 percent of answers giving importance to the relations with the immediate western neighboring country. Things seem to faring worse for Greece in the perception of Albanian citizens. 25.7 percent of citizens attach outmost importance to relation with Greece, not very different from last year but still a low figure especially in the light of the fact that 23 percent say the same for example about the Arab countries. Almost 36 percent of citizens gave primary importance to relations with Turkey, largely perceives as a friendly ally in the country especially due to it previous and present stance on Kosovo.

The country less strategic to Albania in the perceptions of citizens seems to be Russia which has gotten 17 percent of answers.

Looking at the larger picture it becomes clear that once all the pieces are in the puzzle Albanian align themselves geopolitically with the West. The do so with a determined voice since the difference in the importance they give to western alliances and neighbors is much larger than to any others. This does not undermine the fact that with increased investment, transactions and economic ties the relative importance of Turkey and the Arab countries is starting to be felt.

-Regional partners: average esteem except for Kosovo

While 76 percent of the respondents advocate for stronger and substantial attention to relations with Kosovo, when it comes to other countries in the region, strong estimation falls to levels around 40 percent. Support to relations with Kosovo has risen from 63 percent last year with a full ten percentage points, signaling the influence of nationalistic discourse present throughout the year.

Hence 45 percent of Albanians attach the same strategic importance to Montenegro, Macedonia and 37.7 percent to Croatia. Less respondents, about a quarter of the sample, think the same about Bosnia.

Only 15.5 percent seem to think that relations should be strengthened with Serbia. Relations with Serbia remain problematic in the popular perceptions. Last year a stunning 36 percent of Albanians did not think that the relations between Albania and Serbia mattered at all⁵⁾, while this year this category has fallen to 25 percent shifting mostly to smaller importance given.

Overall Albanians attach smaller importance to relation with neighbors than to relations with other Western countries and alliances. In another survey carried out by AIIS to assess transition dynamics in Albania⁶⁾, a fifth of the sample answered that Albania's security was threatened by its two neighbors placing almost equal weight of this perceived risk on Serbia and Greece.

-Visa free travel: affecting the lives of Albanians every day

Half of the citizens asked have travelled in the first six months of 2012 in a Schengen state, with the majority of them choosing Italy (35 percent of travelers) and Greece (32 percent) as their destinations followed by Germany (15 percent) and France (8.5 percent). The popular destinations correspond naturally to the two neighbors where the bulk of Albanian resident migrants are located and explain why most respondents mention meeting family as the aim of their travel.

Visa free travel continues to affect majorly the lives of ordinary Albanians. For the majority of them (34 percent) the opportunity to visit friends and family is key to their appreciation while for others (19 percent) it provides a welcome facility for spending vacations and trips abroad. One in ten Albanians asked also mentions the important fact that free travel makes them feel equal to their counterparts in Europe.

5. AIIS: 'The European Perspective of Albania 2011', www.aiis-albania.org

6. AIIS: "Albania Twenty Years After: people on state and democracy", 2011.

-Knowledge and sources of information: the importance of the media cannot be overestimated

The majority of Albanians this year seem to be better informed about Albania's status *vis a vis* the integration process, probably to heightened media coverage. Hence around 62 percent of Albanians have correctly identified their country as a potential candidate country while 27.5 percent said that Albania already is a candidate country. The number of people that say that Albania is an EU member has decreased to an insignificant percentage.

This improvement in basic information comes largely as the result of intensive almost daily media coverage of the political processes in Albania framed in the language of integration and the status. The high degree of politicization of many issues which were presented and discussed as either 'conditions to be met for the status' or as 'threats to the chances of obtaining status', has made people more aware about the status *per se*.

It is to be highlighted that the EU Info centers, active in Tirana but also in two important university towns such as Shkodra and Vlora, have had considerable impact in the situation of information and cultural exchange.

Traditional media is the main source of information about EU and the integration process for almost half of the sample, followed by around 27 percent that use the Internet as their main info venue. One in ten Albanians has received information about the above-mentioned in school or as a result of school activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local ownership: responsibility call for Elections 2013

The level of support for integration is again back up , comparing to a slight fall seen last year at the aftermath of visa free travel which naturally depleted a powerful incentive for support. The normalization of the political scene on the domestic ground is also reflected in the answers given by citizens this year. Hence we have a certain return to normalcy in the way citizens experience and evaluate the integration process necessary to make once again the claim that more local ownership of the process is vital. While the political crisis exacerbated the need for high level intervention the political climate now has a window of opportunity, at least until the onset of the elections campaign for a focused approach towards local ownership.

Since the conduct of free and fair elections is not only a precondition for opening accession negotiations, but most importantly it is judged by the Albanian citizens themselves as an important factor affecting integration, the political actors should take the utmost responsibility to provide all guarantees for a normal and trustworthy electoral process.

EU and its institutions: a richer approach to conditionality

The European Union and its institutions should depart from a formalistic approach when it comes to their relations with Albania and the other candidate countries. For example, the highlight and the

importance given to issuing new legislation and adopting European legislation is not sufficient and often misleading. And if the process is reduced only to legislation that can be also very harmful.

The sole translation and adaptation of European laws (*acquis communautaire*) in Albania, (just as in every other candidate and potential candidate country) is simply not sufficient. In many cases the impressive European legislation is not applicable in the local context,⁷⁾ because they miss the practical sublegal acts and the other obligatory instruments,⁸⁾ except political will or the political culture that still needs to learn how to respect and implement the laws.

Moreover in the case of Albania further focus is need for the health of democracy and public services (education and healthcare) and other factors that are of primary importance such as environmental destruction which is becoming prevalent. The conditionality principle in order to be beneficial to the progress of the country needs to resonate better with the real necessities and real issues on the ground. 'Progress is not a cold checklist and EU needs to make sure that there is a bigger picture' in Albania⁹⁾ and that might require a larger framework than the one presented by the 12 priorities.

As the final decision about the status has not been made yet, and it is conditional upon completion of a few key reforms until December, the full effect of EU transformative power is yet to come with the start of the efforts to secure the opening of negotiations. Hence positive fine tuning on the conditionality towards Albania is possible.

7. Blendi Kajsia, "Krisja e nje paradigme", Panorama, 13/10/2012 at <http://www.panorama.com.al/2012/10/13/krisja-e-nje-paradigme/> Accessed on 22/10/2012

8. An anonymous expert working on urban planning in Albania informed the authors that the very leaders of central and local power in Albania often become obstacles to the issuing of sublegal acts and instruments that would make the European laws more applicable to Albania.

9. Tirana Times, "The Greater Picture", October 19-25, (Vol 9/Nr 39) page 6, www.tiranatimes.com

Regional cooperation: trust building and transparency for better neighborly relations

The persisted low importance and sometimes negative associations for Albania's region neighbors need to be addressed by foreign policy actors compounded by effort in media, education and civil society. Albania is often praised for its stabilizing and constructive role as a political actor in the Western Balkan scene however ordinary citizens seem to carry indifferent if not negative beliefs about many countries in the region. The importance of friendly and economic relations with all region partners needs to be present for the public as well. In the field of European integration, regional context is larger than what citizens think.

Moreover, even in the absence of an impetus such as the joint aim of becoming EU members, the political, economic and cultural tie need to be improved with the neighbors for the benefit of the countries themselves. Hence projects, initiatives at grassroots level and between similar categories of society (artist, scholars, etc) should receive support from donors and should be based on local ownership.

Knowledge and information: intensify and diversify

Despite noticeable improvements in the answers given by citizens, confusion and lack of knowledge is still visible even in basic questions that aim to identify Albania's status vis a vis the EU. We can see more of confusion in answers related to the factors influencing the progress of integration. In the same time we see the persistence of unrealistic expectations and the assumption of conditions as benefits.

The survey identifies the media as well as Internet as the two most important sources hence it is clear that intensification of efforts to

disseminate information via these channels is welcomed. However capacity building for journalists, editors and analysts should be integrated into these efforts in order to improve quality parallel to increasing quantity of knowledge and especially avoid misconception. Capacity building can be orientated also towards inspiring creative and simple language ways to transmit the message effectively.

The Progress Report should also be treated as a document that needs explaining, discussing and that can feed constructive debate. This would turn it into a functional instrument for promoting integration from within the country. Journalists and opinion makers can be the primary participants in this kind of debate. Training the journalists that cover issues related to integration is an immediate need that needs a medium term plan.

Analytical survey studies should be more frequent and diverse. The EU Delegation as well as central government structures have an interest to assess perceptions and expectations of integration in a professional neutral way hence they should support initiatives that aim at local ownership of the process. Apart from macro overviews at the national scale such as this one, other surveys should be made with specific interest groups and various society categories starting from the business community which is directly involved as a stakeholder as well as professionals in the education field.

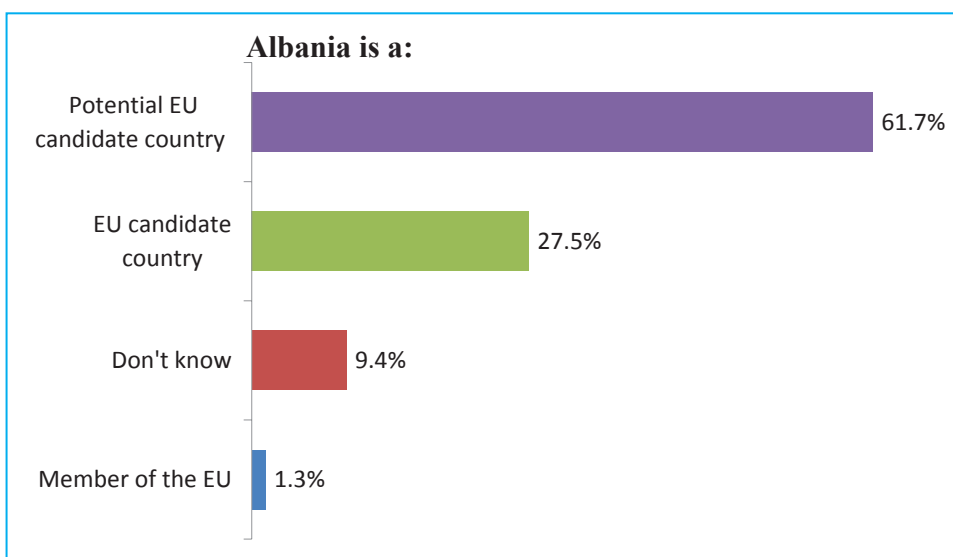
Civil society outreach to the public needs to improve with more focused and perhaps more local efforts, reaching beyond activities in the capital and working with the education sector to improve the knowledge of young people in this regard.

School is one of the best places to learn about the EU and yet it is mentioned by a small percentage (less than 10) of respondents. Young people should be placed at the core of initiatives. From a strategic point of view, education curricula need to be enriched with

information regarding EU and integration. School should become a venue where knowledge about the two is easy to deliver in a creative yet systematic way. The Ministry of Education has the primary responsibility to further this idea, potentially in close collaboration with the Ministry of Integration and with the assistance of involved think tanks and CSOs.

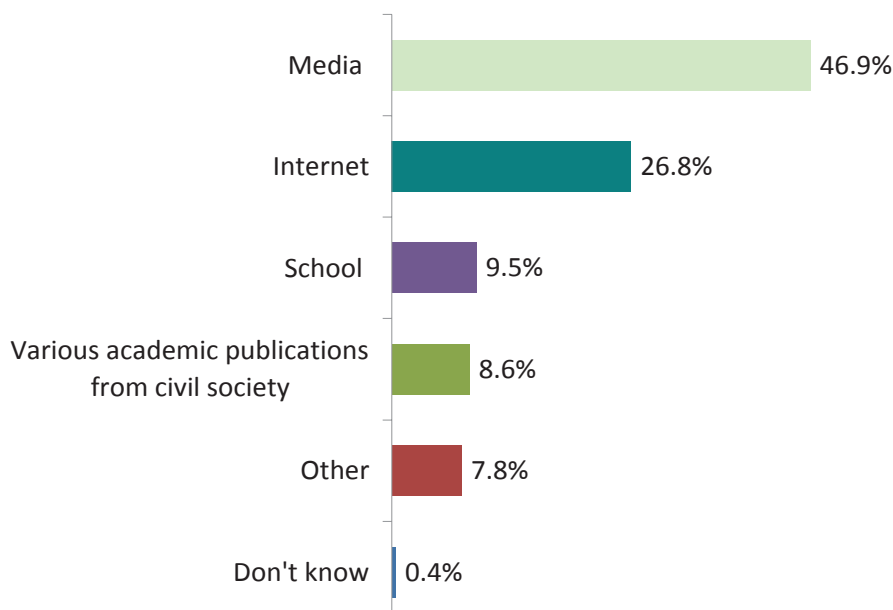
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Knowledge and sources of information



Most Albanians, almost 62 percent, report the correct answer to this question due to the fact that the media has highlighted daily the fact that Albania awaits the decision for candidate status. This is departure from last year where most of the people reported the wrong answer, assuming that Albania already had candidate status. Only 27.5 percent give the same answer this year. There is also a good development in the falling of numbers of people who say that Albania is an EU member state, which was around 10 percent in 2011 and is statistically insignificant this year. Once again there is reason to believe that intensive media coverage of the status debate has helped the clarification of this issue. Roughly one in ten Albanians does not know the current status of Albania in its integration path.

Sources used for information on the EU and Albania's European integration process



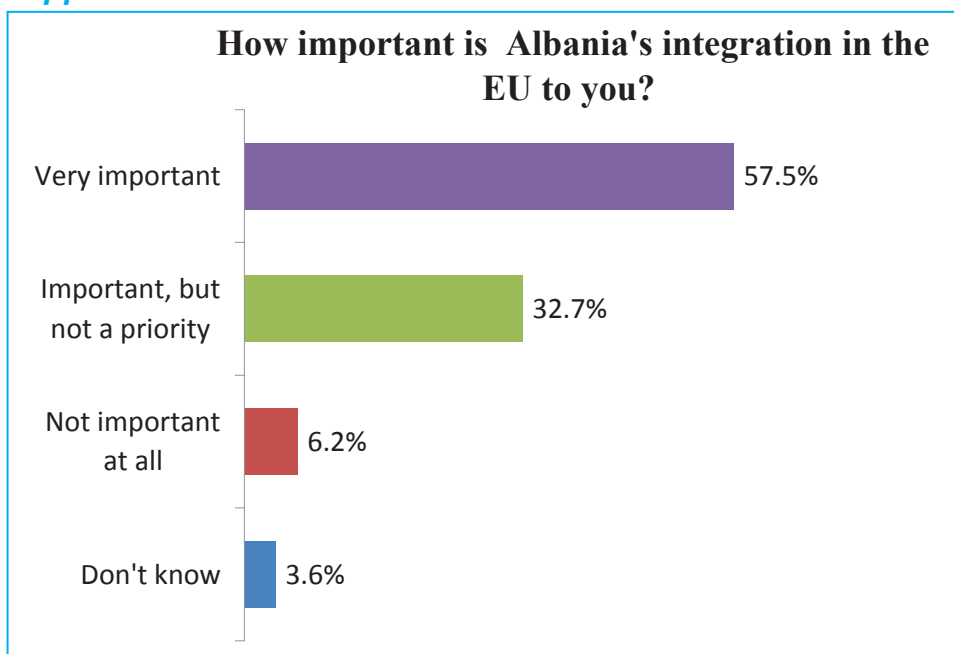
Media retains the first place when it comes to sources of information for Albanian citizens. While this survey asked them about the specific sources that they use to get information for the EU and for the integration process, half of the sample mentions the regular media while slightly more than a quarter uses the Internet. School materials and activities are mentioned by one in ten respondents while roughly the same also gets information from various academic and civil society publications. 7.8 percent of the respondents mention other sources of information such as friend conversations, etc.

EU Info centers, active in Tirana but also in two important university towns such as Shkodra and Vlora, have had considerable impact in the situation of information and cultural exchange. They have not only assisted a variety of stakeholders to obtain information about the EU and the integration process, but most importantly they have been venues supporting and organizing important events that promote

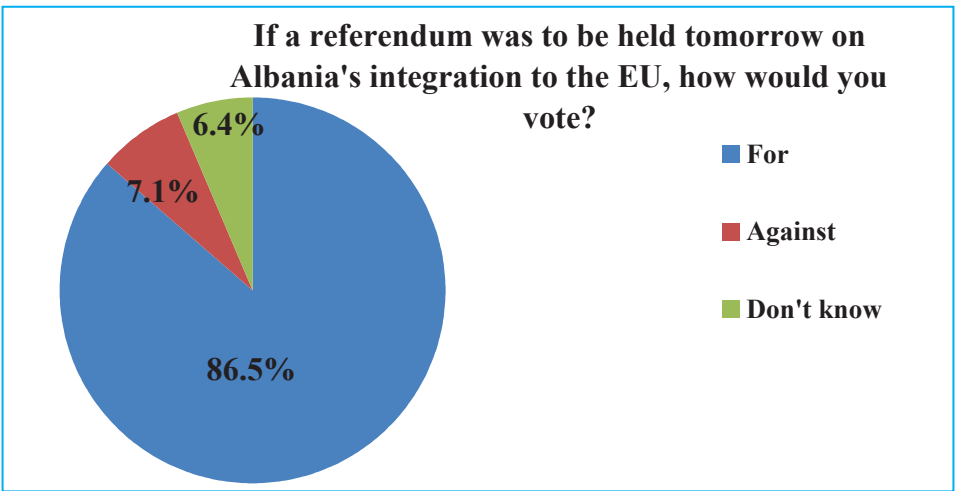
European culture in Albania. This has been achieved through a variety of cultural and artistic events that have gone hand in hand with the usual informative tasks of the centers.

The significance of this questions points to the importance of the media in Albania, which can not be overestimated. Even when asked about sources of information in general the vast majority of Albanians use the television and print to get their daily news.

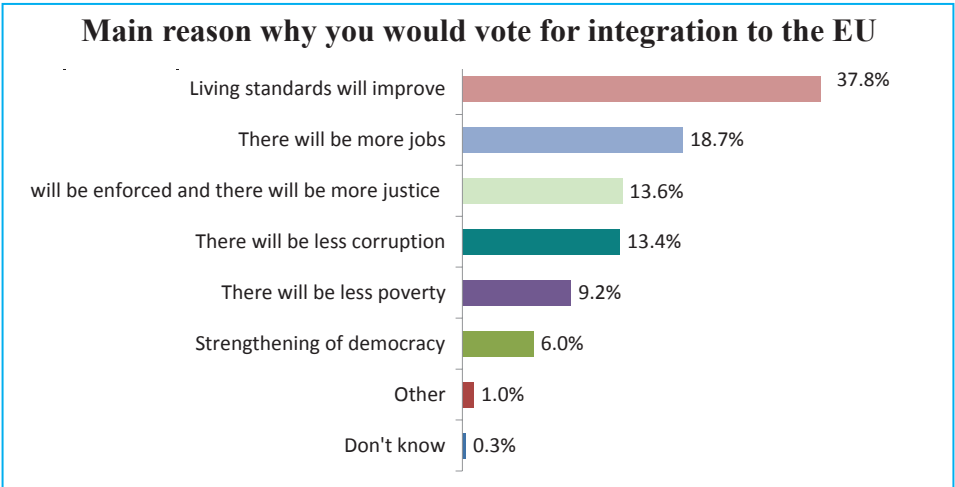
Support and reasons



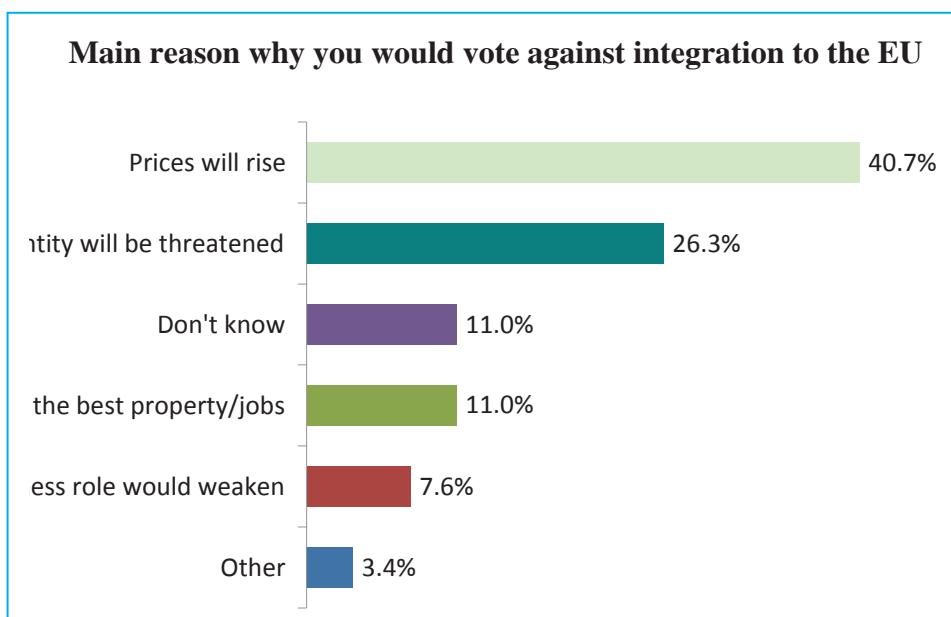
The majority of Albanians, 57.5 percent consider the integration of Albania as very important for them personally, followed by a second group of relatively 33 percent that say that integration for them is important however not a priority. Only a small group of 6.2 percent attaches no personal importance to the process of integration. There is a flip of answers compared to last year when the majority of respondents in 2011 said that integration was important however not a personal priority for them.



In a hypothetical referendum 86.5 percent of Albanians would vote in favor of their country's accession to the European Union, marking a increase of almost six percentage points compared to the last years 80.7 percent. Even more significant is the change in the numbers of people who would vote against, which for the current year of 2012 is only 7.1 percent compared to 10.5 percent. A small group, 6.4 percent of people do not answer or say don't know this year signaling slightly less confusion than last year when 8.8 percent of people didn't know or couldn't answer.



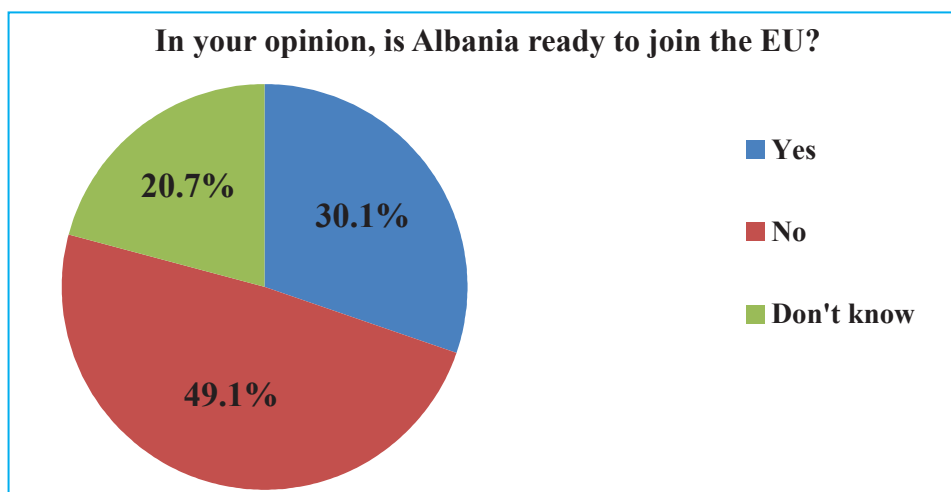
When it comes to the reasons behind their support almost 38 percent of the respondents, the largest group, cites that they expect the standard of life to rise and 18.7 percent expect new job opening hence a positive development for unemployment. 13.6 percent say that the law will be implemented and that justice will be put to place, while a similarly sized group, 13.4 percent expect less corruption once Albania is part of the EU, and 9.2 percent expect less poverty. Another 6 percent cite the strengthening of democracy as a reason to support integration. Once again, as noted repeatedly over the years, Albanian citizens have a very hard time to separate expectations from conditions of integration. The mentality which holds integration and the EU at the image of “*a magic all-fixing stick*” continues as people over and over again mention things like declining corruption and poverty and consolidation of rule of law as benefits of integration rather than what they really are, i.e. conditions to be met prior to entry.



AIIS asked the people who would vote against the accession of Albania into the EU about their reasons. The primary reason once

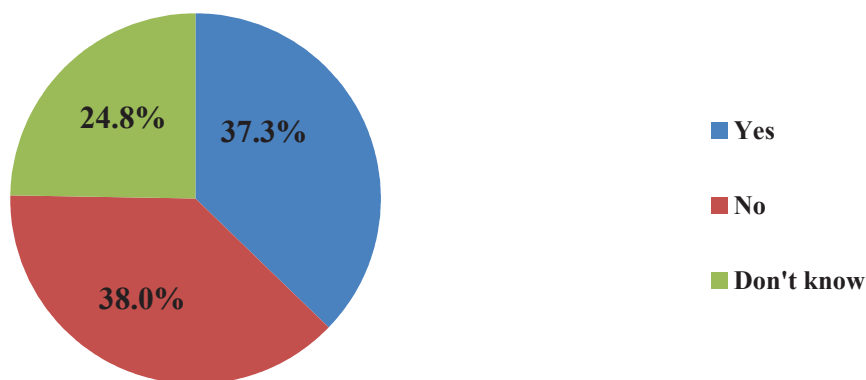
again as witnessed in previous years recurrently is the expected rise in prices, a perception likely rising from confusion related to the adoption of the euro. One other source of this perception might be the fact that it is an experience that has been reported for new member states by media before. Hence 41 percent of those who would vote against do so because they anticipate prices to rise, while 26.3 percent cite as a reason the threat that accession would present to the Albanian national identity. Smaller groups of 11 and 7.6 percent respectively cite that the foreigners would take the best jobs and that the portion of Albanian business would weaken. 11 percent cite no reason or say that they don't know.

Progress and readiness



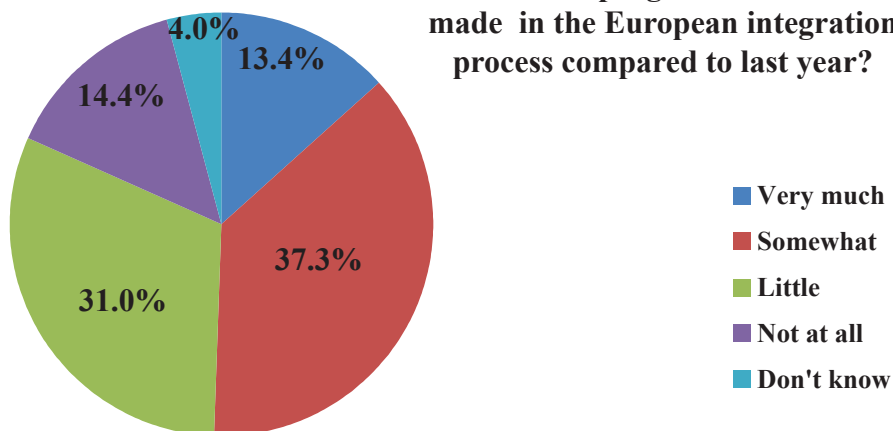
The majority of Albanians, 49.1 percent believe that Albania is not yet ready to become an EU member state, while 30.1 percent think it is in fact ready to join. A large group of people 20.7 percent do not know how to answer the question, representing a large part of the sample that's signals confusion and indecision on how to evaluate the country's readiness. Compared to last, the number of people who claim that Albania is not ready for accession has almost doubled.

Do you think that the EU should accept Albania even if it is not ready?



Albanians seem roughly divided in two groups when asked about whether the EU should accept Albania even if it's not ready. 37.3 percent of the people are in favor of this idea while 38 percent think that the EU should not accept Albania before it is ready. A quarter of the sample answers that they don't know. Compared to last year where 50 percent of the people were adamantly against accession before the country is ready and when only 19 percent said yes, this year many fluctuate: with more people in favor and more that don't know how to answer.

How much progress has Albania made in the European integration process compared to last year?



When asked to evaluate the relative progress in the integration process, compared to last year the majority of the respondents, 37.3 percent believe that there have been some degree of progress, followed by 31 percent who think that the progress has been little. 14.4 percent believe there has been no progress at all while another 13.4 percent believe that the progress achieved has been considerable. Similar to the situation last year the majority of people evaluate the progress as little or average.

International and regional partnerships

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much attention should the government pay to relations with the following? (A lot of attention 10-9, attention 8-7, some attention 6-5, no attention 4-3, no attention at all 2-1.)

	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
EU	1.3%	1.4%	5.6%	11.9%	79.8%
NATO	0.9%	2.7%	9.2%	25.9%	61.3%
UN	1.2%	3.4%	12.1%	22.3%	61.0%
USA	1.1%	1.5%	6.8%	11.9%	78.8%
Italy	1.2%	2.2%	12.4%	32.3%	51.9%
Greece	14.6%	7.9%	22.7%	39.2%	25.7%
Turkey	3.8%	7.1%	19.0%	34.3%	35.8%
Russia	16.9%	14.1%	29.5%	21.7%	17.7%
Arab Countries	15.2%	15.1%	22.8%	23.7%	23.2%

The dynamics of the evaluations given by Albanian citizens to the importance of relations that Albania should have with international organizations as well as important countries, is quite static with the greatest value and importance placed on relations with the EU and USA. Hence 80 percent of the respondents believe that the Albanian government should pay maximum attention to the relations with the

EU, while almost the same number, 79 percent think the same about the relations with the USA. The EU retains for many years now the first place in the ranking of organizations and countries that Albania should be most careful in maintain good relations with. Positive evaluations have been given traditionally, and there is no difference this year as well, to relations with NATO and the UN. Roughly 61 percent of citizens believe outmost attention should be given to relations with these major international organizations.

Except for major international organizations and alliances as well as the USA, the questionnaire aims to measure perceptions about EU neighbors, countries from the Western Balkans and other countries which in a way represent different geopolitical anchors (Turkey, Arab countries, Russia). In previous years AIIS , for academic purposes, measured perceptions about selected other EU member states with which Albania had relations, however since 2010 this has been discontinued and only the immediate adjacent countries, Italy and Greece have been kept to measure relations with them in the specific neighbor context.

When particular countries are considered, the immediate western neighbor of Albania Italy retains the place of the favorite picked with 51 percent of answers. Only a quarter of the respondents evaluate relations with Greece as of outmost importance while the number of Turkey is 35 percent. However most people think that due attention should be paid to the southern neighbor with almost 40 percent of the sample falling in the 7-8 category of evaluation which still indicates that attention should be paid.

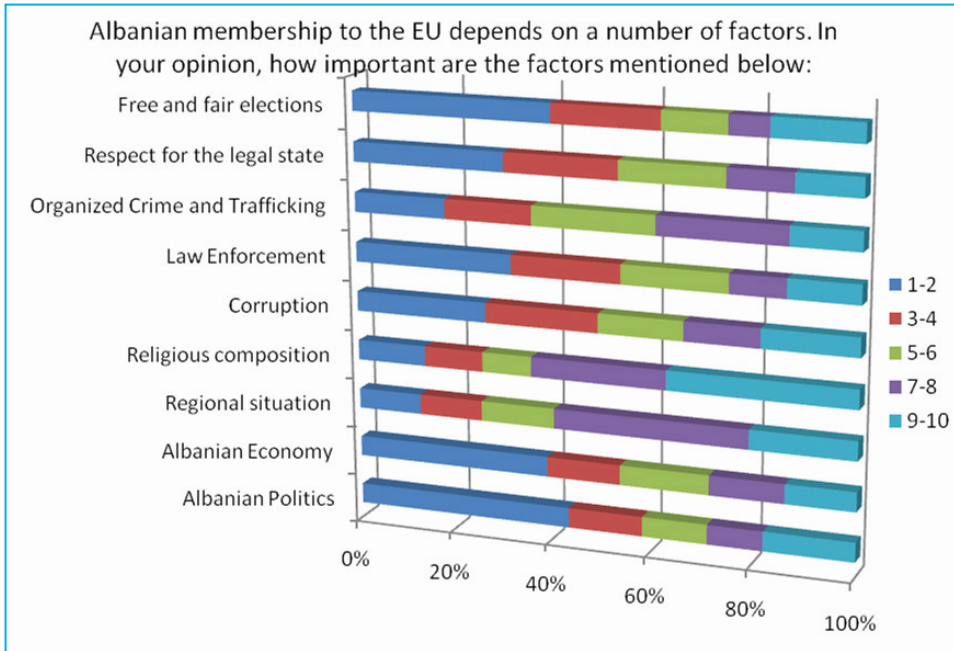
In the ranking, Russia and the Arab countries take up the last places when their strategic importance is considered *vis a vis* Albania, a dynamics similar to last year as well.

On a scale from 1-10 how much attention should be paid by the Albanian government to strengthening relations with these neighboring or region countries?

	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Croatia	2.7%	8.0%	16.3%	35.3%	37.7%
BiH	5.3%	10.7%	24.8%	34.5%	24.7%
Macedonia	5.3%	9.1%	17.7%	28.6%	39.5%
Serbia	26.0%	15.0%	24.6%	19.0%	15.5%
Kosovo	2.0%	3.2%	7.8%	11.1%	75.9%
Montenegro	3.3%	6.9%	15.3%	29.0%	45.6%

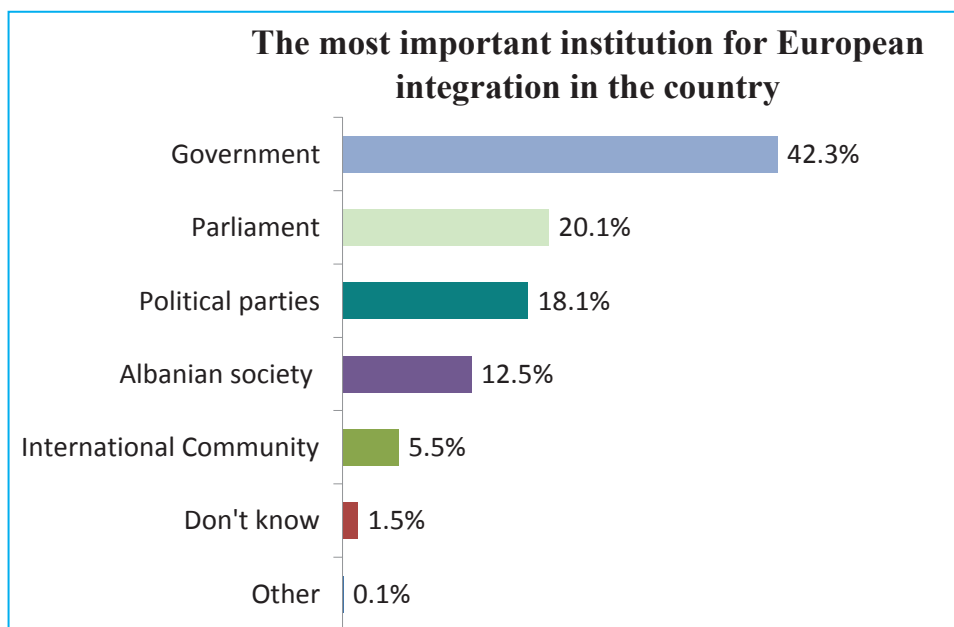
The panorama presented by the same answers when it comes to evaluation of different countries in the region is more diverse. 76 percent of Albanians, by far the largest group, believe the government should pay outmost attention to relations with Kosovo, indicating a major trend of national identification. 45 percent believe the same for Montenegro and 40 percent for Macedonia. Only 15 percent of people believe outmost attention should be paid to Serbia while a full quarter of the sample thinks that no attention at all should be devoted by the Albanian government to relations with Serbia, a significant large number compared to people saying this about other countries which are very small groups, almost insignificant.

Factors and institutions



'Albanian politics', 'Albanian economy' and 'Free and fair elections' are the three main factors that according to Albanians affect the European integration process pace and success, so that Albania can arrive at the finish line of accession. 44 percent of citizens think that Albanian politics is the main factor affecting integration, followed by 40 percent that think the same about economy and elections. The onset of the electoral year has affected considerably perceptions of citizens. While last year respondents placed a relatively modest significance on elections, this year the fact that the next round of general elections is in the first half of 2013 has brought them up again on the radar of sensitive factors to be evaluated.

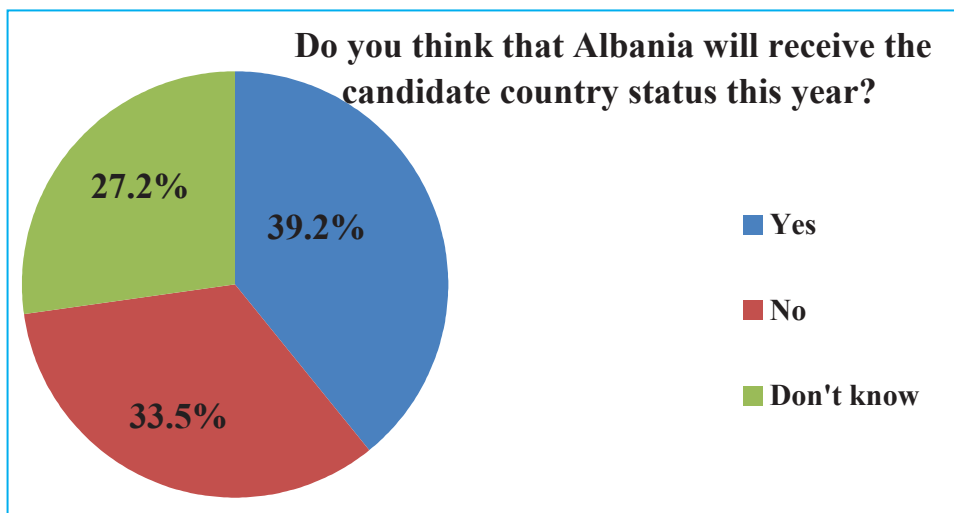
When it comes to the less important factors, the two which are singled out are the religious composition of Albania as well as the situation in the region with only around 13 percent of citizens placing primary importance to them in relation to European integration.



The Albanian citizens have responded quickly to the change of dynamics in the Albanian political scene. Last year the majority of citizens mirrored the frozen climate between majority and position which took a hard toll on the integration process, named political parties as the main institution important for European integration. This year with the political crisis finally thawing, things seem to have returned to normalcy even in citizens perceptions. Hence 42.3 percent of Albanians place the biggest importance on the executive saying that the government is the most important institution for the country's integration followed by 20 percent who think the same about the parliament. Political parties are named again by 18 percent of citizens while 12.5 percent place importance on the Albanian society. A meager 5.5 percent believe that the international community has the biggest importance.

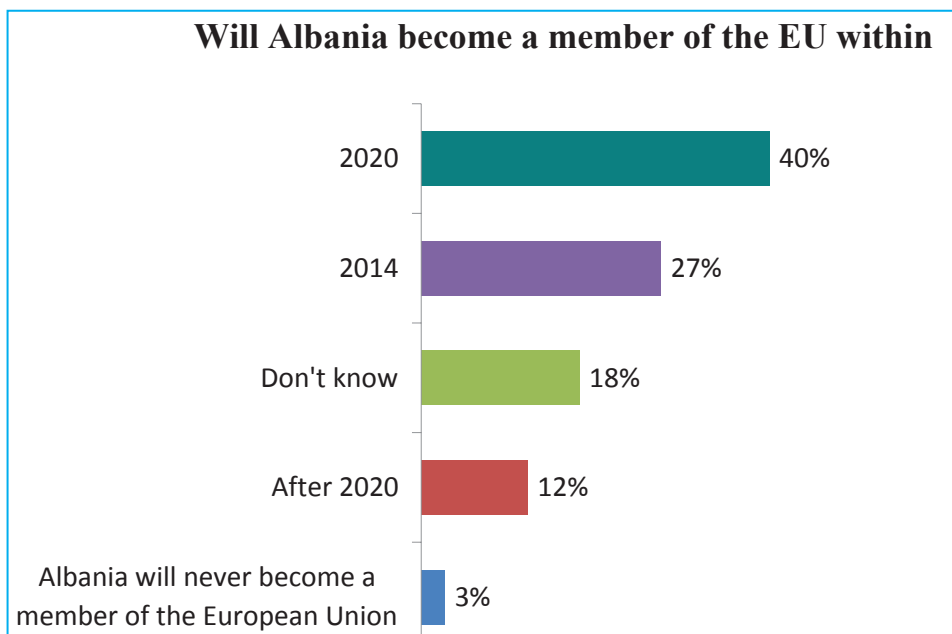
The hottest issue this year has been naturally the decision for granting or not the candidate status to Albania. Prior to October 10, suspense built up by the politicians, EU officials and particularly media had

many Albanians affected in their expectations. Prior to the date in which the European Commission granted a positive yet conditional recommendation for the status, a majority of Albanian however were indeed optimistic. Hence 39.2 percent believed that Albania would get a positive answer this year. 33.5 percent said that this was not going to happen, followed by more than 20 percent who could not make up their minds and answered “don’t know.”



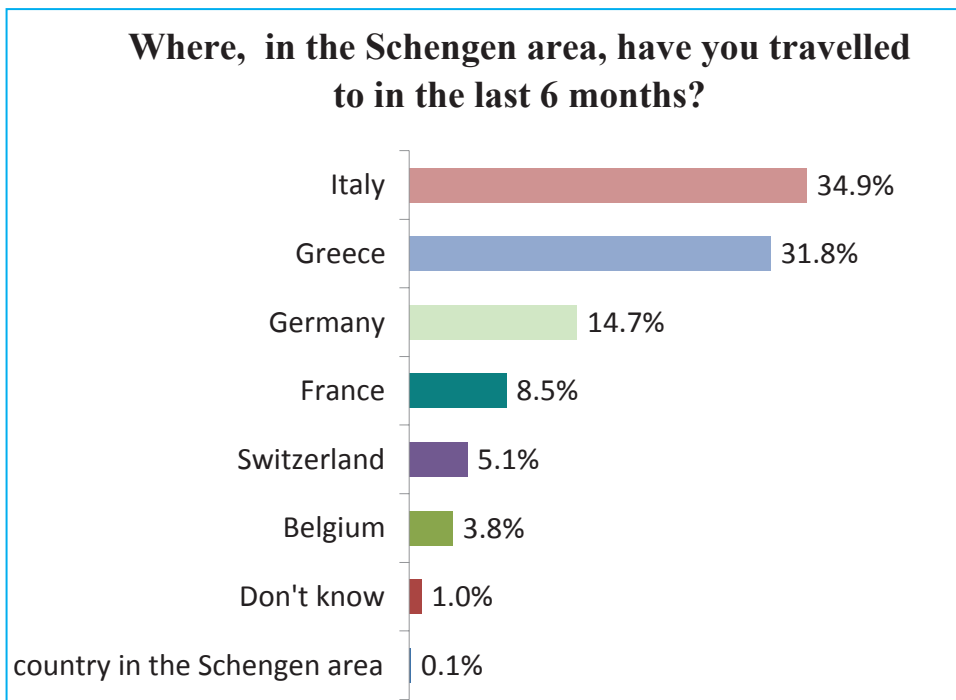
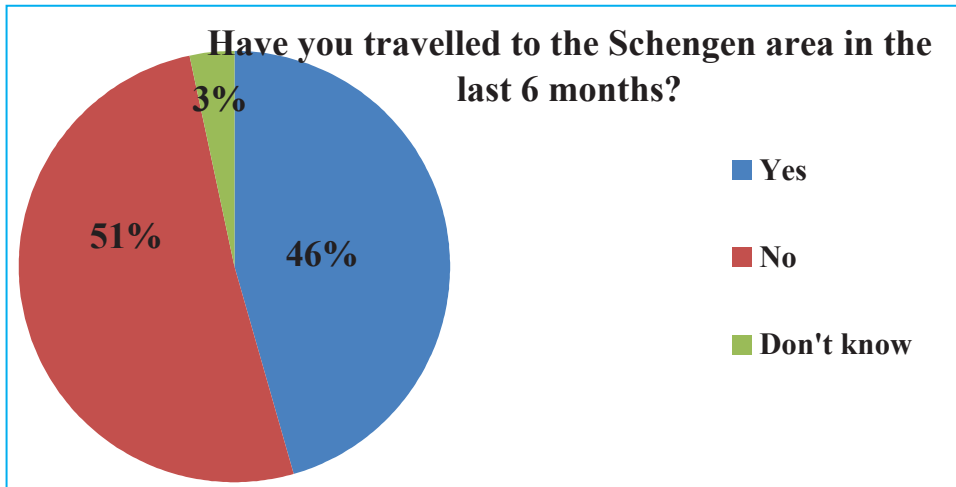
Another expectation tested in citizens was that of a particular year in which Albania is to become a member of the European Union. Similar to the answers given last year, this year 40 percent of citizens say that accession is very likely to happen in 2020, 27 percent being overly optimistic expect this to happen in the next two years, 12 percent say it will happen after 2020 and 18 percent could to give an answer. Year after year there are a considerable percentage of people whose expectations for the accession timing are quite unrealistic.

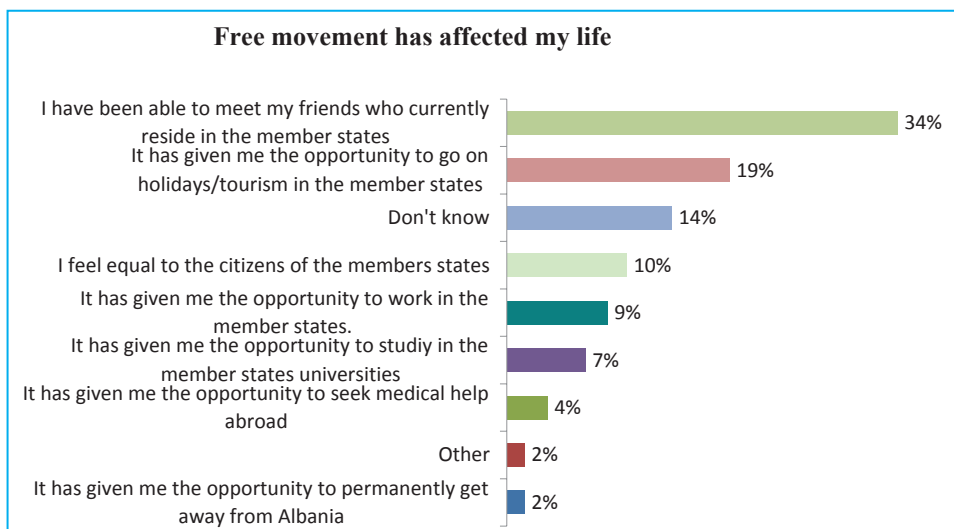
The most important change this year is that the percentage of people who say that Albania will never succeed to become a EU member state has gone down to 3 percent, compared to 9.6 percent last year.



Visa free travel

Roughly half of Albanian citizens 46 percent have travelled to a Schengen area country in the beginning of 2012, followed by 51 percent who have not. The primary destinations for travel of citizens have been the usual countries that host the majority of Albanian migrants: Italy (35 percent) and Greece (32 percent), followed by Germany and France being destinations for 14 and 8 percent of the travelers. Smaller numbers of citizens have also traveled to Switzerland and Belgium.





Two years after being able to travel without visas, Albanians continue to be greatly affected by this development and the majority still cites that this has affected their lives mostly by providing the ability to visit family and friends abroad. 19 percent have benefited from visa-free travel in order to spend their vacations or go as tourists in the destination countries. Respectively 9 and 7 percent mention to have benefited for their work and studies, while only 4 percent have been affected because this gave them a possibility to seek medical care abroad.

10 percent of those asked mentioned that visa free travel makes them feel equal to other citizens in the member states

METHODOLOGY

Given the fact that this survey study is by now an annual project and constitutes one of the main pillars of the European program at the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS), the used methodology combines a traditional approach which allows for cross-time comparisons with some limited interventions that aim at collecting knowledge on various aspects dependant on the context which varies every year.

This study is the eleventh annual report since September 2002 when AIIS issued its first survey report within the framework of its project “European Integration – Perceptions and Realities”. In the first four surveys and the reports based upon them the goal was to asses the awareness and perceptions on the European Union and Albania’s accession process within five target groups which form the country’s elite.

AIIS has advocated for long that the process of European integration can never be successful if the views of the average citizens are not taken into account and if the ordinary Albanians do not support the much needed reforms that will hopefully take Albania into the EU.

The long term traditional objectives of the entire cycle of the survey studies are:

- a) The assessment of the level of support and importance for European integration in Albania as well as the perceptions,

- expectations and attitudes towards the EU
- b) Evaluate the levels of awareness and perceptions of the respondents with regards to the integration process
 - c) the evaluation of the factors and institutions related to and affecting the pace of the integration
 - d) citizens' perceptions on the relative weight of different facets of Albanian foreign policy
 - e) Where applicable, assess the differences in perceptions, expectations, levels of information and attitudes between:
 - a) different categories of respondents, and
 - b) between this year's respondents and those of the 2011 survey
 - f) The identification of the main sources of information on the EU for the respondents

Drafting of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for this survey consists of questions that can be grouped forming several distinctive parts:

- 1) Support for and importance of the integration process
- 2) Progress and readiness for membership of the country
- 3) Factors and institutions affecting the process
- 4) International and regional partners of Albania
- 5) Visa free travel dynamics and effects
- 6) Knowledge and sources of information on the EU.

As usual the questionnaire had a part on general information on the respondents.

Each year the questionnaire undergoes a process of inspection and evaluation in order to reassess the validity of questions and consider suggestions about new questions or the reformulation of old ones. This is done by a team of four experts two of which are representatives of AIIS involved in the project for many years and two are external

experts which bring along new enriching ideas. This year for example considering the context new questions can be spotted about the candidate status decision regarding Albania.

Polling

The polling fieldwork for the survey was completed during the two months and in line with the aims of the survey the respondents were chosen at random and not from any specific categories. This allowed the AIIS to obtain data of a more representative nature. Once again the survey involved respondents from Albania's ten major cities. The respondents do not constitute one homogenous block, but can be divided into different groups or categories in accordance with their employment status, educational background, age and gender.

These categories can be summed up as follows:

Employment status

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Housewives
- Students
- Pensioners

Educational Background

- No education
- Elementary education
- Primary education (9 years)
- High school/ secondary education
- University level
- Graduate level

Age groups

- 18 – 24 years of age
- 25 – 35 years of age
- 36 – 45 years of age
- 46 – 55 years of age
- Over 55 years of age

Margin of Error and Strengths of the Survey

This survey since it is based on a representative sample, can be considered as a public survey in the traditional sense of the word and the results can be used to show the perceptions and knowledge of the Albanian public at large. The chosen sample size is sufficient to allow for statistical analysis for the Albanian public.

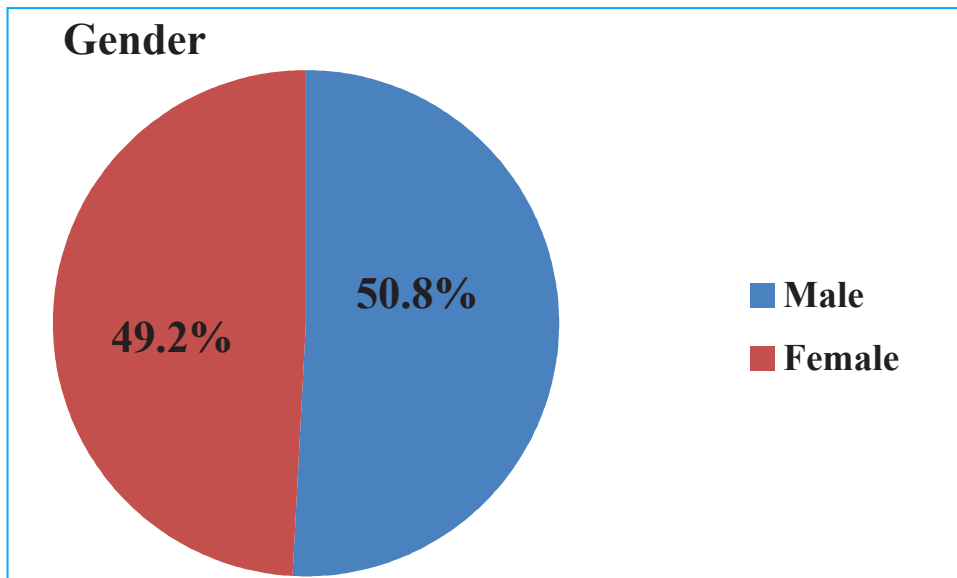
As with all surveys this one also makes no exception in carrying within itself the risk factors related to its representativeness. Statistically speaking this survey has a margin of error ± 2 percent.

That said it must also be pointed out that the survey has some substantial strengths. The fact that this is eleventh time a survey of this nature was carried out meant that the AIIS team could rely on a considerable level of experience and efficiency. The questionnaire bears witness to this fact: it was designed to be short and to the point and of a conversational nature thus making the respondents feel at ease and eliciting frank and candid answers.

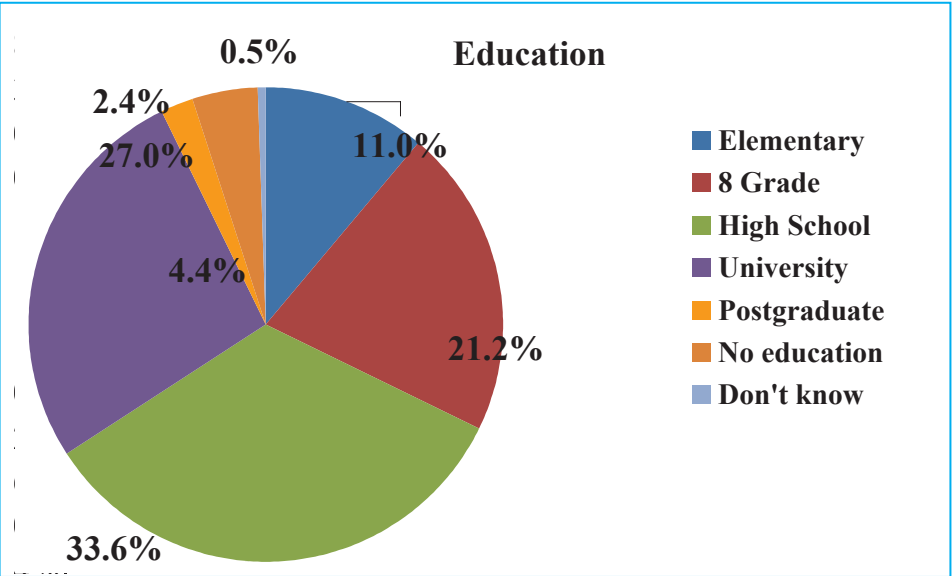
SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

1200 citizens randomly selected were interviewed in 10 Albanian cities. The characteristics of the sample by gender, age, education and employment are given below:

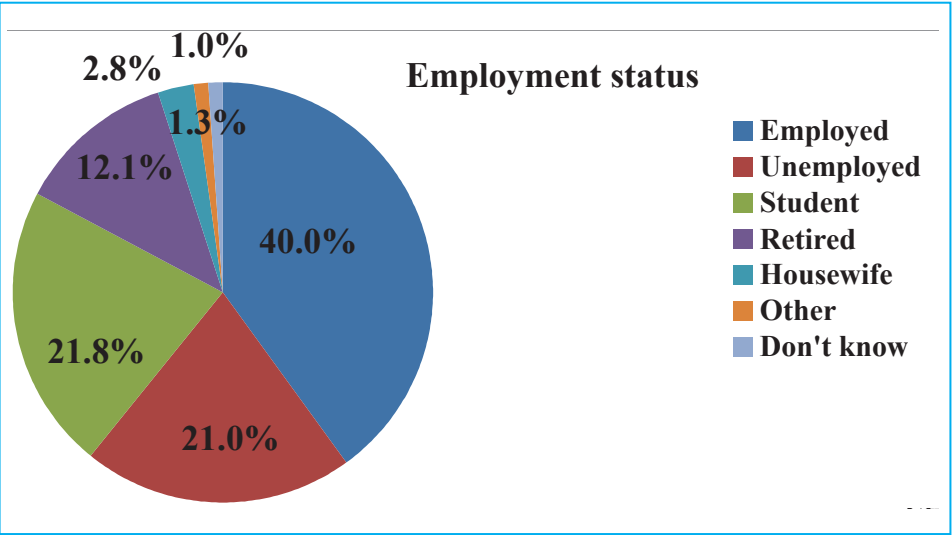
The sample was roughly divided equally between 49.2 percent male respondents and 50.8 percent female respondents.



The majority of the sample is made up by people having primary, elementary or middle level education respectively 4.4 percent, 21 percent and 33.6 percent followed by 27 percent who have university level and 2.4 percent which have post-university degrees.



40 percent of the sample is made of employed people while 21 percent is in the unemployed category. 21.8 percent are students while a smaller group of 12 percent are pensioners. The small has also small numbers of in-home employed people such as housewives (2.8 percent.)



When different age groups are characterized, the young average age of Albanians is reflected also in this sample where 25 percent of the respondents belong to the 18-24 years old age group, 27 percent of the sample belongs to the 25-35 age group of while 19.6 percent belong to the 36-45 years old age group. The group of people in the age group of 46-55 years old is 13.6 percent, while the elder group comprises 14.5 percent of the sample.

